

Words About the Picture: Material and Metaphor in Dante Gabriel

Rossetti's Inscribed Picture Frames

Dinah Roe

In considering the relationship between visual art and poetry, Dante Gabriel Rossetti writes, “Picture and poem bear the same relation to each other as beauty does in man and woman: the point of meeting where the two are most identical is the supreme perfection” (*Collected Works* 1:510). Like the Blakean proverbs it imitates, this statement generates more questions than it answers. Rossetti’s slippery and ambiguous phrasing here enacts the difficulties of locating this “point of meeting.” The proverb teases us with the possibility of a direct equivalence: “picture is to poem as man is to woman.” What destabilizes the comparison is his introduction of “beauty,” a term which is never defined, but seems to have something to do with a “supreme perfection” achieved at the “point of meeting where the two” (in this case either picture and poem *or* man and woman, *or* both) are “most identical.”

Simultaneously celebrating difference and its erasure, this quotation deepens the confusion by ending on an oxymoron; things are either identical or not – there is no such thing as “most identical.” At first glance, this phrase seems desperately unhelpful in discovering what Rossetti really thought about the “relation” pictures “bear” to poems. If ever there were a Pre-Raphaelite sentiment that needed a visual illustration, this is it. While falling short of an explanation, Rossetti’s notion of picture’s and poem’s “point of meeting”

raises important questions regarding the painter-poet's practice. Where does he think that picture and poem meet? Where does one end and the other begin?

Focussing on Rossetti's double work, *The Blessed Damozel* (1871 – 1878), I propose that Rossetti's inscribed picture frames can be understood as a "point of meeting" between picture and poem. As threshold spaces which are at once linguistic and visual, Rossetti's picture frames challenge the compartmentalization of word and image, remaking the picture frame into what Richard Phelan usefully calls a "disorientation zone" (163).¹ Andrea Henderson has noted that the artificiality of Rossetti's picture frame makes us "conscious of its function as a boundary or limit" (920). It also, I would argue, makes us conscious of the opposite. As Georges Teyssot reminds us, a limit or border zone can be considered a "middle place" which "loses the meaning of pure obstacle and becomes voidal and interstitial, a space where things can happen, a happening, a performance, an event or a narrative, for instance—an in-cident" ("A Topology of Thresholds" 107). I want to show how Rossetti's preoccupation with liminality, both within the pictorial space and on the picture frame, draws attention to the permeability and vulnerability of boundaries, and their potential as threshold spaces "where things can happen."

Rossetti's picture frames, although spatially located on the borders of his canvases, should not be considered marginal or subservient to his pictures' meaning, but central to their interpretation. The poems on the frames are both diegetic and mimetic; they represent by showing and telling. They can be classified somewhere between Derrida's parergon ("half-work and half-outside-the-work, neither work nor outside-the-work") and Genette's paratext ("a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of

transaction") (Derrida 122; *Paratext* 2). But neither construction is entirely satisfactory, as I hope to demonstrate here.

Before going on to consider the interart aesthetics of Rossetti's inscriptions, I would like to begin by thinking about the material contexts of his picture frames. An 1857 book on art connoisseurship and the anatomy of pictures explains the purpose of a picture frame:

As we say, "Good wine needs no bush," so we may remark that a good picture needs no frame; that is, to heighten its beauty or render it intelligible. We may, and do, adopt a frame to confine the eye to the work alone, that by surrounding it with one colour we may not be distracted by other objects adjacent.

(Wilkins 68)

The Pre-Raphaelites strongly disagreed. Led by Ford Madox Brown, who had been inspired by early Italian works during an 1845 trip to Rome, the Pre-Raphaelites began designing frames which would attract the eye and encourage viewers to understand the frame as an essential part of the artwork, rather than merely its servant. Against conventional wisdom, frames would both heighten a picture's beauty and comment on its meaning. If the frame were special enough, it could even inspire a painting. For instance, in August 1871, Dante Gabriel Rossetti mentions to William Bell Scott that he is working "on a small picture to fit a beautiful old frame I have" *Correspondence* 5: 95).²

Frame historians Mitchell and Roberts identify Ford Madox Brown's 1853 painting *The Seeds and Fruit of English Poetry* (fig. 1) as a catalyst for innovative frame design in the nineteenth century. The importance of frames is doubly emphasized in this work; the picture itself incorporates "an arched triptych with colonettes into the integral painted

structure,” while the material frame, with its three-dimensional fruits and seeds, extends both the motifs and the theme of the picture itself (Mitchell and Roberts 68). Chaucer, the Father of English Poetry, is in the center, with the inheritors of his poetic legacy: Milton, Spencer and Shakespeare on the left side of the triptych and Byron, Pope and Burns on the right. Cherubs hold cartouches with the names Campbell, Moore, Shelley, Keats, Chatterton, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Note the importance of inscription; we know exactly who these poets are because they are helpfully labelled both in the picture and on its frame.³

The seeds and fruit of English poetry, it turns out, are so fertile that they start growing out of the painting itself, transforming both the painted picture frame (note the grapes and grape vines growing on the arched triptych) and the material picture frame into a veritable trellis. This is a work which, rather than “confining” the eye to picture, wants the eye to be “distracted by other objects”; by literally extending itself, the frame encourages viewers to make connections between the picture and themselves as both viewers and readers. This frame, which draws attention to its artificiality, is not simply an illusionistic “window” into another world, but a celebration of the power of artifice. The Royal Academy missed the point entirely; Brown was furious when the picture was displayed “*without the frame*” (Quoted in *PRDL* 108, italics are Brown’s).⁴

Brown envisions the relationship between painting and poetry as fruitful, organic and symbiotic. Furthermore, his picture advocates a literal and literary reframing of attitudes to English poetry. As David Latham reminds us, English literature was then “a subject considered unworthy for academic study in a university,” while the work of recent poets such as Chatterton, Keats and Shelley was not at all universally admired in the way

Madox-Brown's picture suggests (25). But Brown felt that the English should emulate the Italians in openly celebrating their literary heritage, and, paradoxically perhaps, a good place to start was through another artistic medium.

This cross-pollination between poetry and painting, between fine arts and literature, anticipates what Isobel Armstrong calls the "transgressive hybridity" that would become one of Pre-Raphaelitism's defining characteristics (18). Dante Gabriel Rossetti's frame poems are, I argue, a materialization of this hybridity. At once word and image, these poems intensify the liminal significance of the space they occupy. They are threshold meditations that mediate not only between media, but between art and the outside world, transforming paintings into image / texts, and viewers into viewer / readers. Rossetti's experiments with painting and poetry hybrids gesture towards a wider Pre-Raphaelite preoccupation: the porousness of boundaries in general.

Picture frames were always important to Rossetti. Throughout his career, he corresponded regularly with frame-makers, sending them designs, patterns, measurements and instructions which he insisted they follow to the letter. He also designed his own picture frames, both in collaboration with Brown and on his own. Their modern, geometrical designs were very influential, generating a huge number of diverse reeded frames during the last third of the nineteenth century. Mitchell and Roberts argue that Brown's and Rossetti's partnership "acted like a stone thrown into still water, creating concentric circles of effect which reached out into Europe" (355).

Rossetti personally oversaw his frame inscriptions, revealing how much the words on the frame meant to him. In November 1873, Rossetti wrote to his patron George Rae that "An inscription is much more difficult to do properly than a picture," a surprising

admission from a commissioned painter. He also told Rae that, in the art of frame inscription, both the visual appearance of the words and their punctuation were important: “If it is a bit too large or too black the picture goes to the devil; & if you have not someone to do it who has an elective affinity to commas and pauses, I will ask you to spare my poor sonnet.” (*Correspondence* 6: 320).⁵

Rossetti was aware that his perfectionism could be tiresome. In May 1873, he joked to Madox Brown: “My frame makers have taken to writing me the most wildly imaginative letters on the subject of my complaints” (*Correspondence* 6: 135). He often disputed “monstrous” charges for frames, wondering, for instance, in April 1873 “Why in the name of Hell should any frame for this d – d Beatrice be charged to any one either £12 or £20?”, and threatening frequently to find new frame-makers (*Correspondence* 6: 102).

From the 1870s, when his favorite frame-maker Joseph Green retired, he used Foorde and Dickinson in London and Charles Rowley and Co., Ltd. in Manchester. It was during this time that Rossetti developed another frame, which Mitchell and Roberts note is “surprisingly modern” in appearance (373). The central boards are tilted inwards toward the painting, and round medallions are set onto the slanted surface. This new style is significant because it provided a surface which was very amenable to writing. As Rossetti’s frames got simpler, the inscriptions became more complex. For example, the frame of *A Vision of Fiammetta* (1878) is inscribed with three texts: Boccaccio’s Italian sonnet, “On his Last Sight of Fiammetta,” that inspired the picture; Rossetti’s English translation of that sonnet; and his own original sonnet inspired by the project as a whole. Unlike contemporaries such as Millais and Hunt, who invoked authors like Shakespeare or

Tennyson with brief quotations on their picture frames, Rossetti, by invoking himself, adds to a literary as well as a pictorial tradition.

This literary activity, though it is carried out in what are ostensibly the *margins* of the picture, is in fact central to understanding Rossetti's project, particularly in the context of Pre-Raphaelitism, which saw words and images as intimately related. The words on the frame are both *about* the image (in the sense that they pertain to it) and *about* the image (in the sense that they are on its borders). The words on the frame draw attention to the frame as not simply a marginal space (in the sense that it is farthest from the center), but as a liminal or threshold space. Words on Rossetti's frames are more than captions, glosses or other forms of marginalia. Even when they are not his own, words emphasize the threshold function of the frames on which they appear.

For example, the frame inscription for *Mary in the House of St. John* (1858) intensifies both its narrative and symbolic content (fig. 2). The picture's subject is the liminal moment between Christ's death and resurrection. Here the window-bars form the shape of a crucifix. Mary and St. John stand before the window, lighting a lamp at twilight, meant to symbolize the preparations man must make in the dark, uncertain time between Christ's death and resurrection.⁶ The spinning wheel shows that there is work yet to be done. Taken from the Gospel of John, the quotations on the picture frame record Christ's words before his death. They also hail from a Gospel which does not yet exist in the timeline the picture represents. The biblical inscriptions here are not captions or glosses for the events depicted; they complicate and challenge the notion of linear time and chronological narrative.

This is a good example of the distinctive, plainer frames with which Rossetti and Brown were experimenting at the time, using woodgrain as a decorative feature, an effect achieved by gilding directly onto the flat oak surface of the frame. Compare it, for instance, with the elaborate frame of Holman Hunt's contemporaneous work *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1855-60, fig. 3), about which *The Manchester Guardian* observed in April 1860: "the symbols have overflowed the picture and expanded themselves all over the frame," effectively upstaging the scriptural texts on the ivory flat (qtd in Stephens *William Holman Hunt* 115). The plain, smooth surface of Rossetti's frame also allows the words to feature much more prominently than on Hunt's frame; the visible woodgrain itself is suggestive of the organic, living power of language. The frame also liberates the words from the bottom rail. They surround the image, allowing their meaning to circulate. These words are not confined by the miters (which are disguised) but cross over, guiding our eyes around the frame; it is on the frame that we double our identities in relation to the artwork, becoming viewer / readers of image and text.

Seeing, reading and writing reveal themselves as the major preoccupations of this work. Christ, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's only four-starred "Immortal" (and human / divine hybrid), cannot be seen in this picture, but we can hear him as he "speaks" of his disappearance on the words of the picture frame.⁷ "A little while and ye shall not see me," reads the top, while on the bottom are Christ's words, "And again a little while, and ye shall see me" (John 16:16). Textually and visually significant, the eight-pointed stars (Christian symbols of regeneration) that center the words on the top and bottom rails also suggest ellipses which visually represent the temporal situation the words describe ("a little

while”). At once punctuation and picture, these stars connect biblical verses that literally and figuratively frame the events depicted.

Conventionally understood to have been the testimony of John the Evangelist,⁸ Christ’s words serve several functions beyond orientating us in terms of New Testament narrative. These quotations are reported speech that gives us access to the gospel writer’s thoughts; John is remembering Christ’s words to him *before* the events depicted in this picture. They are also addressed to us; viewer / readers of this painting are reminded that although they cannot “see” Christ, they “shall see” him.

The second frame quotation is equally preoccupied with speaking and seeing. On the left are the dying Christ’s words: “He saith unto his mother, ‘Woman, behold thy son!’ Then saith he to the disciple, ‘Behold thy mother!’” On the right side are the words, “And from that hour, the disciple took her unto his own home.”⁹ Speaking (narration) and seeing are connected: Christ tells the John and Mary to see (“behold”) their relationship to one another differently, and they do. His words reframe John and Mary’s relationship as their perception shifts under divine instruction; they must now “behold” or “see” each other as mother and son. Yet, in contrast to the top-to-bottom quotation, Rossetti’s left to right quotation draws our attention to the mediated nature of Christ’s speech. Quotations marks and identifiers (“he saith,” “saith he”) remind us that Christ’s words have a frame of their own: John himself.

Describing the painting to Ellen Heaton in April 1856, Rossetti draws attention to the “tablets and writing implements on [St. John’s] knees” (qtd Surtees 1:66). These allude to John’s Gospel, which will transmit his story to mankind. Taken as a whole, the picture suggests that the very words that appear on its frame are those which are being recorded

for posterity in the Gospel of John in the aftermath of Christ's death. Rossetti's inscribed words not only give us access to John's thoughts, but visually suggest the way in which St. John's gospel will transcend its original, cramped and confined context (private family grief in a domestic setting), to frame a much larger, circular narrative of death and resurrection that will influence all Christians. The frame highlights the importance of language in the transmission of stories, making a case for the importance of the verbal and linguistic alongside the visual. The same significance is also stressed in the Gospel of John itself, which famously starts: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1: 1).

Ruskin notably describes *Mary in the House of St John* in literary terms, praising it as an example of Rossetti's "great poetical genius," adding that if he had to choose one picture to represent the "purity and completeness" of the "sternly materialistic though deeply reverent, veracity" in Pre-Raphaelite depictions of the life of Christ, it would be this one (Ruskin 270). Yet I think Ruskin misidentifies "purity and completeness" as Rossetti's achievements where they are in fact his subjects. In examining Rossetti's frame inscriptions, I want to suggest that Rossetti's experiments with painting and poetry hybrids simultaneously aspire toward and recognise the impossibility of achieving "purity and completeness," reflecting a wider Pre-Raphaelite preoccupation with and excitement about the porousness of boundaries in general.

Before examining these ideas in light of *The Blessed Damozel*, I would like to think about picture frames as both conceptual and material spaces. The category confusion Rossetti promotes means that his double works do not conform easily to existing critical or theoretical models. For example, Derrida's concept of the *parergon* is helpful in thinking

about the dual function of the picture frame. His recognition of the complexity of the frame, “a border which is itself double in its trait, and joins together what it splits” (331), deconstructs the Kantian separation between inside the work or *ergon* (painting) and outside the work *parergon* (frame). He argues that if we look at a painting, we see the frame is part of the wall, and that if we look at the wall, we see the frame is part of a painting. This means that the picture frame is neither outside nor inside the work, just as the picture frame is neither part of nor entirely separate from the wall. Therefore, the function of a picture frame is not simply to separate the interior from the exterior, but to reveal this separation as a conceptual impossibility. Instead, the frame serves a liminal function as a mediator between interior and exterior spaces (canvas and frame; picture and wall).

Derrida’s recognition of the frame as a threshold space is relevant to Rossetti’s practice. But the critic’s portrayal of the *parergon* as “arising in order to supplement [the work] because of the lack within the work” privileges the painting over the frame; this is precisely the sort of hierarchical relationship that Rossetti’s work resists (122). Regarding the frame as secondary material also insists on the marginality of its inscription, the pitfalls of which become apparent when we examine critical responses to Rossetti’s frame poems.

Critics have often read Rossetti’s sonnets in this way: as didactic supplements to the picture. Lynn Pearce writes that the sonnets for *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* are “intended not to correct one viewing possibility so much as to impose the right one, the *only one*” (40). Elizabeth Helsinger feels that the sonnets patronize the viewer, who is addressed “as if she were a medieval parishioner in need of instruction through pictures and through the authority of the priest, who could make such pictures speak to those who

could not read” (44). Catherine Golden argues that “The sonnet, readily conveying the meaning and history behind the figures on canvas, directs and organizes the reader / viewer’s response to the mythology of the painting which can only be hinted at on canvas through symbols and meaning-laden details” (395).

This critical insistence on the prescriptive function of Rossetti’s word underestimates the ways in which language deliberately complicates the image (and vice-versa). Rather than marginal comments compensating for some “lack” in the central visual material, Rossetti’s frame poems are simultaneously material and linguistic. His picture frames are more than margins; they are thresholds. As Linda Shires persuasively observes, “Materially, [Rossetti] forces the viewer / reader to move back and forth in space and time between words and images,” arguing that “becoming a reader / viewer is part of the very topic of the painting / sonnet set” (38). This complexity of this movement is enhanced when we consider that the words themselves are images. Therefore, the reader / viewer is not just moving back and forth between pictures and words, but between pictures and words that are also pictures of words.

Gérard Genette’s work on paratext, which recognizes the importance of liminality in dealing with textual border material, offers some advances on Derrida, particularly where language is concerned. Genette identifies paratexts (titles, prefaces, introductions) as important threshold spaces that surround and extend the main text. Although he does not treat border material as compensating for a lack in the main text, Genette regards border material as prescriptive. Quoting Philippe Lejeune, he describes paratexts as ““a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text”” (qtd *Paratext* 2). While Genette recognizes that margins serve a double-function as thresholds, his focus on

textual apparatus (prefaces, afterwords, glosses) as a means of interpretative control does not map neatly onto Rossetti's double works for the simple reason that his frame poems are not purely textual. Paratextual analysis can only partially account for the slippage between word and image in the work of a painter-poet.

Challenging as they are, the theories of Genette and Derrida provide a way of considering the complex interaction of the material and metaphorical in Rossetti's inscribed picture frames. Located on threshold spaces surrounding liminal subject matter, Rossetti's frame poems reposition everything as liminal, including viewers; when encountering his double works, we are neither viewers nor readers, but viewer / readers "in-between" these subject positions.

Employing a paradox derived from social anthropology, I would like to suggest ways in which liminality is central to Rossetti's interdisciplinary practice. Bjørn Thomassen writes that

Liminality is not to be confused with marginality. Liminal spaces are right enough found at the fringes, at the limits. However, there is more to it than that. Had we just been talking about the peripheral, or the "far-away," we would be dealing with marginality: that which is the furthest away from the centre. Liminal spaces are in-between spaces, and therefore central (21).

A picture frame belongs both to the painting and to the outside world; its concerns are at once marginal (on the edges) and central (by virtue of its inbetweenness), a paradox by which Rossetti's frame poems are both delighted and troubled. Rossetti's picture frames, then, are not simply Derrida's parergonal supplements that make up for a "lack" in the images they contain. Nor are the words on the frames mere paratextual attempts to "control" the reading of those images. Rossetti's liminal frame poems subvert the notion of a controlling narrative, whether in language or in image. What Rossetti is after, or at

least what he achieves, is an effect Walter Pater identifies in his 1868 review of William Morris's poetry, which later becomes the conclusion to *The Renaissance*:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp, importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence, the cohesive force is suspended like a trick of magic, each object is loosed into a group of impressions, colour, odour, texture, in the mind of the observer (310).

Pater characterizes our relationship to "external objects" as mobile and fluid, rather than static and prescriptive. Here, "the mind of the observer" is not passive, but interactive, an "influence" that changes the object under observation. Similarly, Rossetti's frame poems valorize dissipation, disorientation and subjectivity, rather than seeking to control or direct the viewer's experience. They appeal to the reflective mind of the observer, insisting that viewers work out the relationship between picture and poem (frame and words; picture frame and wall; painting and outside world) and even their own double-identities as viewers / readers, for themselves. Word and image are not meant to cohere; their relationship to one another is impressionistic, loose, synesthetic.

Rossetti's inscribed picture frames materialize the "whirl of aesthetic terminology" (335), to which Robert Buchanan famously objects in his review of Rossetti's *Poems* (1870). Buchanan's anxieties about "The Blessed Damozel" in particular derive from his discomfort with its liminality. Describing the poem as one which causes readers to "hover uncertainly between picturesqueness and namby-pamby," he argues that the first few verses of the Damozel give us not the subject of a poem, but "the subject, or part of the subject, of a picture, and the inventor should either have painted it or left it alone altogether..." (341). Buchanan sees poetry and painting as antagonistic and incompatible, viewing the boundary between them as pure obstacle rather than threshold. He writes, "The

truth is that literature, and more particularly poetry, is in a very bad way when one art gets hold of another, and imposes upon it its conditions and limitations.” In his view, the blurring of the boundaries between painting and poetry indicates an underdeveloped idea: “Poetry is something more than painting; and an idea will not become a poem because it is too smudgy for a picture.” While admitting that “The thing would have been almost too much in the shape of a picture,” Buchanan concludes that “the inventor should either have painted it or left it alone altogether.” His language registers his uneasiness with those testing the boundaries between painting and poetry. Rossetti is neither artist nor poet, but an “inventor” creating an interart “thing” whose existence would simply be “too much” (341). The fundamental irony here is that Buchanan’s discomfort anticipates Rossetti’s future experiments with “The Blessed Damozel” as a double work. Buchanan should have been careful what he wished for; three months after his review appeared, William Graham commissioned *The Blessed Damozel*, a painting which went on to rival the original poem as Rossetti’s most famous production. The importance of Rossetti’s prose response to Buchanan, “The Stealthy School of Criticism” has long been acknowledged, but I would argue that *The Blessed Damozel* should be recognized as an equally powerful creative rejoinder.

Where Buchanan worries that limitations will impose themselves when one art gets ahold of another, Rossetti interrogates the idea of limitation itself. In “The Stealthy School of Criticism,” he “[takes] a wider view ... of how much, in the material conditions absolutely given to man to deal with as distinct from his spiritual aspirations, is admissible within the limits of art” (793). Rossetti’s frame poem for *The Blessed Damozel* accommodates the painter poet’s “wider view,” extending the meaning of both picture and

poem while simultaneously drawing attention to their material and metaphorical limits. Teyssot writes that liminal spaces “do not create a nowhere but a somewhere: that is, places that mediate” (“Mapping the Threshold,” 192). I would like to consider Rossetti’s picture frame as “a somewhere” that mediates as well as “a somewhere” that separates.

The Blessed Damozel’s picture frame develops the liminal situation of its pictorial content (fig. 4). The painted lovers are each located in multi-liminal zones; leaning on the heaven’s “golden barriers,” the Damozel is standing on “the rampart [or surrounding wall] of God’s house,” looking towards earth “across the flood of ether” (itself a liminal element which occupies the space between stars and planets) (ll. 142, 25, 32). The space behind the Damozel is also liminal. As Frederic Stephens points out, the lovers surrounding her are located in “large mazes,” and are “seen in changing lights and shadows” (*Dante Gabriel Rossetti* 86). Though located on earth rather than heaven, the Damozel’s lover is also in a liminal zone; he is lying on a riverbank, and the time of day is twilight (between day and night).

The painted “gold bar of Heaven” (l. 2) separating the Damozel from her earthly lover is materialized in the top rail of the predella in which he appears (fig. 4). Yet the predella also brings together what it divides; Damozel and lover; heaven and earth; poem and painting. The painted poem itself appears isolated from the rest of the picture by the reeding and the roundels on the bottom flat. The two angelic figures (fig. 5) that F.G. Stephens identifies as “ministering spirits” are leaning on the “gold bar,” holding the welcoming palms the way someone might hold a pen, pencil or a quill (*Dante Gabriel Rossetti* 87). The diagonal trajectory suggested by the tilt of the palms points towards the miters, which themselves act as a mini-frame for the poem at the bottom. Are the figures

merely drawing attention to the frame poem, or might this be a suggestion that the poem is in some way co-authored by these “ministering spirits?” It is worth nothing that, like almost everything else in this work, the miters serve a double-function, both bringing together and dividing the rails of the frame.

Four stanzas from Rossetti’s poem are reproduced on the bottom rail of the picture frame, forming in effect another “gold bar,” this time separating poem and picture (fig. 6). Yet there is a paradox here; this arrangement also connects the poem to the image. Appearing between the outer and inner moldings, flanked by roundels and arranged to be read from left to right, these stanzas assume the rectangular shape of the gold bar on which they appear, a horizontal orientation very different than their vertical disposition on paper in a volume of poems. These stanzas are framed not *by* the frame (as is the picture), but *within* the frame. In its transition from page to picture frame, the poem’s displacement from the center of the work to its margin could be regarded as a demotion of sorts, except for the fact that the poem originally inspired the picture and in that sense always remains central to the work.

Rossetti’s use of the predella further destabilizes the notion of inside and outside / text and off-text (fig. 5). Belonging to Renaissance Italy, the traditional predella formed the base of an altarpiece and sometimes functioned as a reliquary. It was often decorated with a series of painted panels depicting detailed, narrative scenes that expanded on the theme of the main panel. The pictorial content of Rossetti’s predella, however, frustrates these expectations; the lover looking contemplatively upwards complicates rather than clarifies the story of the main panel. It is left to the poem to achieve the more usual narrative content of the predella. The arrangement and horizontal orientation of the frame poem’s

rectangular stanzas suggests a sequence of predella panels, but here the “story” of the painting is told in words rather than images.

Written in 1847, the poem was reworked many times between its original publication in *The Germ* and its appearance on this picture frame in 1878. It has become a critical commonplace, possibly originating with an error in the online Rossetti Archive, to observe that Rossetti reproduces the first 4 stanzas of his poem on the frame.¹⁰ In fact, he substitutes stanza 7 for stanza 2, effectively suppressing one of the poem’s most erotic images:

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary’s gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn.

(ll. 7 – 12)

One practical reason for the omission of this stanza from the frame may be that painting would struggle to simultaneously depict the Damozel’s front (“Her robe, ungirt”) and the “hair that lay along her back.” The painted Damozel’s flaming red hair is also far from the ripe-corn yellow the poem’s second stanza so memorably describes. In other respects, she seems a straight-forward representation of the woman in the poem’s first stanza, which is inscribed on the frame:

The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,

And the stars in her hair were seven.¹¹

(ll. 1 – 6)

Yet on closer examination, the picture flattens a Damsel who in the poem is notable for depth (“her eyes are deeper than the depth”) and flexible dimensionality: “The blessed damozel *leaned out / From* the gold bar,” and in stanza 8, again, “she *bowed herself and stooped / Out* of the circling charm” (ll. 1 – 2; 43 – 44, italics mine). Here the painted figure is less transgressive than her poetic counterpart; she does not want out (fig. 4). As Kristen Mahoney has noted, the poem’s “damsel, with her striving gaze and her stooped posture, possesses an active and distressed body” (239). In the picture, by contrast, the Damsel leans rather listlessly along the golden bar, not out from it, looking melancholy and abstracted, but not contorted with distress. Her upright posture means that the picture’s viewers are not invited (like the poem’s readers) to appreciate the effect gravity might have on a bosom and an ungirt robe. This painting’s fully-dressed figure could not be more girt “from clasp to hem” if she were wearing a housecoat. Rossetti has even included a scarf to cover stanza eight’s notorious “bosom” that “must have made / The bar she leaned on warm” (ll. 7, 45 – 46).

Rossetti’s picture adapts the poem’s Damsel in other important ways that I suspect speak to his awareness of its commercial contexts, and also perhaps to Buchanan’s criticism of its “fleshly” qualities. Although still no doubt an object of desire, this more modest, compliant Damsel could safely be displayed in the house of Scottish jute manufacturer and Liberal MP William Graham, a patron of the arts who had once requested that artist Frederick Walker paint a modesty-concealing towel on one of his painting’s young male *Bathers* (1869) (Smith, 146).

Rossetti's exclusion of stanza two's "white rose of Mary's gift" from painting and frame poem may also be prudent, toning down the poem's blasphemous erotics and its explicit Mariolatry. Unlike stanza 2, stanza 7 takes our eyes off the fleshly Damozel, redirecting them heavenward to the "lovers, newly met" and "souls mounting up to God" (ll. 37, 41). It also serves an important narrative function in explaining the embracing figures in the background:

Around her, lovers, newly met
 'Mid deathless love's acclaims,
 Spoke evermore among themselves
 Their rapturous new names;
 And the souls mounting up to God
 Went by her like thin flames.

(ll. 37 – 42)

These merging, androgynous lovers perhaps illustrate Rossetti's ideas about "the supreme perfection" at the "point of meeting where the two" (man and woman) are most identical." Line 40 is also revised here; the "rapturous new names" of this poem's sixth printing in 1872 replace the "virginal chaste" names of *Poems* 1870. The word rapture evokes the ecstatic assumption of Christian souls into heaven, yet it allows (unlike the words "virginal, chaste") that this reunion is also erotic.

Rossetti's italics are another important change to the text of his frame poem. Confessing to Swinburne in February 1870 his concern that italics might "look a nuisance" on the page, he decided against including them in print versions of the poem (*Correspondence* 5: 376). Why then does he not think italics "look a nuisance" on a picture frame? The fourth stanza's inscription in italics (fig. 7) emphasizes this double work's concern with the voidal and interstitial; italics draw attention to border zones within texts, or more specifically here, between stanzas and between speakers. The italics address the

vexed question of the narration of “The Blessed Damozel,” which remains highly contested among literary critics. If narrative always speaks, who exactly is speaking in this poem? Some critics think that the lover and the poem’s narrator are one and the same, while others distinguish between their voices. In addition to the omniscient narrator, some identify up to three other voices in the poem (the Damozel, the speaking lover, the dreaming lover, the conscious memory of the lover) while others insist that there is only one: the bereaved lover self-soothingly ventriloquizing his beloved.¹²

The italicized stanza, I think, distinguishes the lover’s voice from the omniscient narrator’s, at least in the context of this double-work. Carefully placed in parentheses, the italics graphically reinforce this stanza’s function as an aside, though one which represents the lover’s thoughts rather than his spoken words. (Rossetti would have chosen quotation marks to represent speech, as he does in other parts of the poem, and indeed on other picture frames).

Set apart from, yet joined to the preceding stanza by the framing device of the parentheses, these italicized lines reveal to us the painted lover’s thoughts, and structurally echo his relationship to the rest of the painting. The bracketed stanza also recalls the relationship of the predella to the main panel. This stanza can be interpreted in terms of Genette’s discussion of a narrative “pause” which is not descriptive but “digressive,” one that “interrupts itself to give up its place to another type of discourse.” This “extradiegetic” type of pause, which is “in the nature of commentary and reflection instead of narration,” also “modifies narrative tempo” (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 36, 37).

Narrative tempo is in fact the subject of the frame poem’s parenthetical, italicized stanza, which reveals that Damozel and lover are separated not only by dizzying amounts

of space, but also of time. The whole year “sets” a different “pace” for each of them. They exist at different speeds and their worlds move at different tempos, the musical resonance of which is suggested in the previous stanza’s presentation of the Damozel as “one of God’s choristers,” and in the “stars” that “sang in their spheres” (ll. 14, 54). The tempo is accelerated in the Damozel’s sphere; her “day” is the lover’s “ten years,” a temporal disjunction intensified by the stanza’s ellipses, caesuras and disorientating tense shifts between past and present:

*(To one, it is ten years of years.
 . . . Yet **now**, and in this place,
 Surely she **leaned** o’er me—her hair
Fell all about my face. . . .
 Nothing: the autumn **fall** of leaves.
 The whole year sets apace.)*

(ll. 19 – 24, bold font mine)

Time is collapsed, as a past action (“she leaned”; “her hair / Fell”) impossibly takes place in the present moment (“now”), a disorientating slippage subtly registered in the movement from “Fell” to “fall.” In a poem obsessed with separation and joining, it is no surprise to find double-meanings here. “To one” plays on the loneliness of separation, but the homophone “To” also suggests reunion, two becoming one, an idea revisited in lines 97 – 98: “(Alas! We two, we two, thou say’st / Yea, one wast thou with me).” The suggestion that Damozel and lover were “one” on a postlapsarian earth and have been made “two” by the Damozel’s heavenly relocation flirts with blasphemy. The desire for two to become one is also visible in a double work that strives for unity between picture and poem. Rossetti’s use of synesthesia throughout registers this linguistically, as when the poem tells us, for example, that the Damozel ‘saw / Time like a pulse shake fierce.’ A poem that can see time can also envision a painted poem or a poem painted.

By painting poetry on the frame, Rossetti draws our attention to the materiality of the words, in effect “re-framing” poetry as visual material in the same way that he reframes the visual material as poetry. His frame poem simultaneously pictures the words and narrates the picture, in essence replicating the experience of the viewer / reader and emphasizing the transmedial nature of frames. The picture frame, which initially presents itself as a static, confining structure that helps to organize meaning, turns out to be an experimental space of shifting boundary zones, frames infinitely framing frames.

While it is tempting to characterize Rossetti’s frame poetry as Genette’s paratextual “space of transition or transaction,” it is worth noting that what makes this transition or transaction special is that it is incomplete. This is a space where transitions and transactions are arrested or, as Pater might have it, “suspended like a trick of magic.” Nothing in picture or poem actually makes it “across” “over” or “through” this frame’s “golden barrier” (although the Damozel and her lover invite us to imagine such transgressions). These words linger perpetually on the threshold of this picture, just as the Damozel leans forever on heaven’s threshold. The picture frame accomplishes what Victor Turner calls “permanent liminality,” a state in which “Transition has become a permanent condition” (107).

Rossetti’s use of liminal space responds to one of the great ironies of liminality, which is its dependence on the very structures it evades. A threshold between two rooms, for instance, belongs simultaneously to both and could not exist without them. *The Blessed Damozel* constructs a series of threshold spaces (between day and night; life and death; heaven and earth; poetry and painting) not in order to cross them (which after all would only reinforce the binaries Rossetti resists) but in order to reconceptualize boundaries and

limits, to (as Rossetti himself would put it), “take a wider view ... of how much ... is admissible within the limits of art.”

The picture frame encourages an interstitial position and perspective that helps to make sense of Rossetti’s paradoxical search for “the point of meeting where [picture and poem] are most identical.” To become literally identical, picture and poem would have to amalgamate in a manner that would obliterate the animating tensions between them. Rather than seeking to erase these differences between word and image, Rossetti instead celebrates their unstable “point of meeting,” the threshold space of the picture frame which connects and separates picture and poem. This “point” is not marginally orientated (located on the outside or the edge), but *liminal*, in between, and therefore central.

Rossetti’s fascination with the liminal relations between art and poetry made it impossible for him to follow Buchanan’s recommendation to “either have painted [‘The Blessed Damozel’] *or* left it alone altogether” (341, italics mine). Rossetti was an artist who rejected “either / or” in favor of the Derridean complications and contradictions of “both / and,” a deconstructionist impulse that is clearly and repeatedly explored via his frame poems. Like the Damozel whose repetition of “We two” aspires towards a paradoxical separate togetherness, Rossetti envisions the “supreme perfection” of the relationship between painting and poetry as one that simultaneously joins what it divides. Ultimately, this double work is both resigned to and charged by the knowledge that choosing a side cannot make the threshold disappear.

NB: Figures are licensed for print only, and are not reproduced in this manuscript.

Notes

¹ Phelan borrows this term from film theorist André Bazin (Bazin 188).

² The picture in question is *Water Willow* (1871).

³ The full inscription on the frame reads: *Milton, Spenser, Shakespeare and Chaucer reading the Legend of Custance to Edward III and his Court. An. Do. 1376. Byron, Pope, Burns.*

⁴ In this period, it was common practice for the Royal Academy to provide generic, ready-made frames for paintings submitted for exhibition.

⁵ In the same letter, Rossetti writes that he will supervise the inscription of *Sibylla Palmifera*'s picture frame himself.

⁶ The picture was originally conceived as the third panel of a triptych that would include *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849) and *Mary Nazarene* (1857). The domestic scene it depicts has no direct biblical source, but is associated with Rossetti's poem "Ave":

Mind'st thou not (when the twilight gone
Left darkness in the house of John,)
Between the naked window-bars
That spacious vigil of the stars?—

(*Collected Poetry* ll. 64 - 67)

⁷ Jesus Christ heads the 1848 list of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's "Immortals," and is given the most stars of approval (*The P.R.B. Journal* 107).

⁸ Echoing John 19: 26, Rossetti's poem "Ave" identifies John the Evangelist as the anonymous "disciple whom [Christ] loved," who is traditionally taken as the source of this canonical Gospel (l. 76). The "disciple ... whom he loved" is also conventionally understood to represent the people of the Christian Church. See also John 21:24: "This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true." See also note 9.

⁹ “When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! / Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home” (John 19: 26 – 7).

¹⁰ “the 1870 text of the first four stanzas appears on the frame...of Rossetti’s oil painting of *The Blessed Damozel*” (“*The Blessed Damozel*: Scholarly Commentary,” <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1847.s244.raw.html>. Accessed 02/08/2018.

¹¹As in “Mary in the House of St. John,” Rossetti uses eight-point stars, symbolic of the regeneration of man, while the three lilies symbolise Marian purity and chastity.

¹² For some different identifications of the poem’s narrator(s), see, for example: Lauter, Paul. “The Narrator of the Blessed Damozel.” *MLN* 73 (1958): 344 – 48; Brown, Thomas H. “The Quest of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in ‘The Blessed Damozel.’” *Victorian Poetry* 10.3 (Autumn 1972): 273-277; Jay D. Sloan. “Attempting ‘Spheral Change’: D.G. Rossetti, Victorian Masculinity, and the Failure of Passion.” *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 13 (Spring 2004): 5 – 20.